

Veterans inflate injuries, internal report alleges

Rehab participants may exaggerate to get benefits, Veterans Affairs says

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The Veterans Affairs Department says some veterans are exaggerating their injuries to continue receiving financial benefits from the government and to avoid joining the workforce.

The allegation is in a recent internal report on a Veterans Affairs rehabilitation program designed to help injured ex-soldiers transition to civilian life, which found thousands of veterans are staying in the program longer than anticipated.

The claim will spark fresh anger among veterans groups and opposition critics who have previously complained about Veterans Affairs Canada's treatment of veterans.

Veterans Affairs Minister Julian Fantino's office, asked this week about the report, said the government will support injured veterans as long as they require assistance.

"Our government makes no apologies for ensuring that veterans receive urgent rehabilitation care when they need it, and that they receive this support for as long as they and their medical practitioner deem appropriate," Fantino spokeswoman Ashlee Smith said in an email.

NDP veterans affairs critic Peter Stoffer was critical of the department's emphasis on potential abuse.

"In my experience, the vast majority of veterans don't want to be sick. They would love to be working full-time. I think they're trying to shift the blame for the problems they have in their own program."

Nearly 1,000 injured veterans enrolled in the rehab program when it began in 2006, the report says. Demand was expected to drop, but more than 5,800 vets were enrolled in March 2013, and 9,100 are expected by 2018.

In a background briefing with the Citizen this week, a Veterans Affairs official attributed the growth to pent-up demand among veterans who had served after the Korean War. But the report also shows that veterans, once they are in the program, aren't leaving.

More than 2,800 of the 5,800 veterans in the program at the end of March 2013 had been participating longer than originally expected, the report found. In fact, of the nearly 1,000 who joined in 2006, nearly one-third were still enrolled.

Reviewers who prepared the report acknowledged some problems with the program. They found weaknesses in determining veterans' needs, including delays in consultations with health-care professionals. And only 28 per cent of veterans who sought help finding a job landed a career they wanted.

They also found the department had little information about how the program was functioning because it relied almost exclusively on voluntary surveys.

"Research indicates respondents may inflate the incidence and severity of health problems and disability in order to rationalize labour force non-participation and/or receipt of disability benefits," the report said.

Meanwhile, only 22 per cent of the 5,800 injured vets in the program were taking advantage of services to help them find a civilian job. Part of this was because about 32 per cent were receiving similar assistance from National Defence.

But 30 per cent were deemed currently unsuitable for such help or simply had no interest. The remaining 16 per cent were veterans found to be too ill or injured to find gainful employment. That number has tripled since 2011 — which reviewers noted coincided with a hike in cash benefits for injured ex-soldiers.

The reviewers concluded that veterans were not very successful in meeting their employment goals and that financial benefits available to injured veterans "may be deterring veterans from actively participating in the vocational aspects of the program and the labour force."

Spokeswoman Kate Murphy said Veterans Affairs Canada "is working to develop new data collection tools and methodologies for measuring veteran outcomes."

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